

RESISTANCE (UNBOUND): SWITCHING UP BDSM'S
POSITION IN CRITICAL PHILOSOPHIES

by

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This undergraduate honors thesis sets out to explore possible intersections between fields of Feminist, Queer, and Frankfurt School Critical theory and the potential value in reconsidering the critical framework of bodies and pleasures to include BDSM (particularly pain and restraint) practices as but one manifold site of possible resistance to patriarchal capitalism. The project begins by articulating some of the elements of pleasure as it is frequently defined culturally, through Freud, and how this is mirrored in some elements of critical philosophies when they touch on the resistance potential of pleasure and the body but either preclude or reject any and all forms of BDSM from conversations of resistance. This project neither seeks to establish BDSM as a silver bullet that should be taken up by everyone as a new unified theory of resistance, nor seeks to preclude it from intersectional conversations about critique and resistance in relation to discipline, production, and enlightenment rationality. Primary authors include: Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, Lee Edelman, Karmen MacKendrick, and Karl Marx.

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I: Introduction

In what follows I will be asserting that there is valuable resistance potential in embodied BDSM praxis worth philosophical and political consideration/exploration. While the opposing camps on this issue were formed and polarized well before my birth it is my hope to draw attention to the conversation as it is developing both in relation to this established back-and-forth, but also from bodies and experiences that I rarely see being represented in this debate. I am not setting out to argue that BDSM practitioners are somehow incapable of abuse, nor that BDSM is a healthy or efficient mode of resistance for everyone. However, I am interested in the remainder that has been obscured in no small part thanks to deficiently self-critical kinksters, as well as blanket kinkphobia and sex-negative discourse in society at large and academia that I take to be a particular reflection of the old Cartesian Mind/body dualism. This is to say, that I am interested in examining the existence of engaged and reflexive BDSM practices and their philosophical and political efficacy as but one manifold site to think through/experience resistance in a profoundly embodied way. At the very least, these practices should not continue to be precluded from intersectional discussions of resistance. The limits of, and potential to resist, socially crystallized discourses that have been produced and continue to produce conceptions and relations of pleasure feels to me to be an eminently important question at the crossroads of feminist theory, queer theory, and Marxist critical theory. This is especially the case when such conceptions/relations of pleasure have been produced through the establishment and reproduction of systems of justification that reify purely productive or positive progressions and economies of exchange between distinct subjects. In the face of

patriarchal capitalism's twisted appropriation of the human capacity for satisfaction and dissatisfaction, a fitting resistance is not a rejection of bodies and pleasure, but rather a vast multiplying of pleasure beyond accepted productive forms¹. To that end I want to argue for the consideration of embodied modes of resistance that open the possibility for more consent, equity, joy, and pleasure, not necessarily for less pain/sensation or restraint.

I see a strong Freudian influence underlying our contemporary understandings of pleasure, which in turn has influenced our conceptions of sexuality, propriety, and consent. Pleasure is largely assumed to be opposed to pain, and intense sensation is to be avoided by a subjective core that must be pleased. But from this comes a different pain. Under contemporary conditions of patriarchal capitalism the most readily justified forms of erotic pleasures are those recognized to facilitate re/production. Which is to say, those pleasures that can fit, or be inoculated into the paradigm of reproductive futurism. In this sense both 'properly' hetero and 'properly' homo neo-liberal sexuality is largely justified based on a telos of desire that ends in marriage, and/or reproductive kinship. Reproduction is not merely a direct biological production of offspring, but also the (re)production of social relations of power through a "proper" "well adjusted" subject. With the rise of Millennial hook up culture, norms around female modesty are being supplanted by new expectations to be knowledgeable about sex. You can hook up as much as you want, but only inasmuch as this is done to facilitate your ability to settle down, or please a man later in life in order to preempt a divorce. Any pleasure found along the way is supposed to only really be a "forepleasure" in the Freudian sense

¹ This isn't to say that production is the only operative expression of capitalism or patriarchy. I would like to expand this project in the future to also examine in more depth issues around consumption.

because the real pleasure is necessarily supposed to come later through the reproduction of a desire that is taken up as though it has always already been Natural. That is, the reproduction of a neo-liberal subjectivity through the figure of the child, which holds the telos of social order in the promise of its always already about-to-be-realized identity.

What I mean here is the seeming imperative, supported and produced by social conventions and institutions, that sexuality be enacted in ways that won't run counter to the production of nuclear families with at least one "good" worker. The preservation of which is overwhelmingly justified through an abstract concept of what is natural and healthy for this figural of the child, which also happens to mark the political/economic/and culturally dominant rationale's own preservation as natural and healthy. The innocence and primacy of this always already about-to-be-realized identity is recognized as such because it is the site where social order will be affirmed as Natural. Even if one were to get married and then divorced that is forgivable, as long as subjectivity can be re-produced such that normative gender, sexuality, and capital are carried forward into the future and can be reasserted as Natural. Any pleasures that are acknowledged or recognized as pleasurable in their own right, not merely because of the legitimation that comes at the closure of the normative narrative are dirty, slutty, perverse, and those who might feel compelled to acknowledge these pleasures are easily shamed and/or pathologized. The effect of this figural child on politics has been to recreate sexual hierarchies wherein normative sexualities (sexualities that have demonstrated that they can biologically or socially preserve the reproduction of good

neoliberal subjects) preserve the cultural burden of *reproducing* meaning (subjectivity, efficiency, identity, capital...) into the future.

Pleasure is not inherently beholden to this system, or contained in this system, however readily it can be appropriated or commodified by it in various forms (such as the mandate to be satisfied or gratified, within acceptable parameters, in one's work or sex life). Pleasure, when embraced in and through its polymorphous multiplications still can disrupt a culture that produces subjects of production, commodification, and consumption because it can be sought out and experienced in ways counter to its 'proper' efficient, calming, tension-abating modalities (which are supposed to be taken for granted). This is to say that while it is unlikely that pleasure has *nothing* to do with the release or easing of tension, it is possible to conceive that pleasure could be experienced, though from a certain viewpoint rather paradoxically, as *both* tension's release *and* its increase. Pain, just as with any other sensation of the body can be pleasurable. Perverse pleasures are drawn-out and sustained over investment in the excitation of forepleasures. When the pleasure inherent in forepleasures is acknowledged or embraced and not rushed through, these 'preliminaries' can become the actual 'aim' of erotic desire (possibly distinguishable from what is taken to be properly 'sex'). If sex is about efficiently reaching closure through the production of satisfaction (be that through orgasm or the final satisfaction of biological/social reproduction of the figure of the child²) what does one make of desires that would seek

² This is perhaps a point to assert briefly some of the ways that gender is implicated in subject formation as it relates to sexual gratification. I would argue that orgasm has a historical weight of being associated with masculine sexual gratification. It has been privileged above that of feminine 'sexual' gratification, which is supposed to come through motherhood and childrearing. Satisfaction in both instances is related to the gratification of an ascribed "natural" productive impulse that has been used to justify all manner of violence in their own right.

to forestall gratification and find *satisfaction* in the escalation of tension in the juxtaposition of pleasure and pain? Such pursuits break open the hold of normative pleasure's teleological signification of individual bodies as material sites of biological/social reproduction whose only true (if not always fulfilling or satisfying) pleasure comes in the form of the gratification of efficiency and least resistance. Counterpleasures, at their base and outset, set out to intensify relations of control and subordination by starting from altered meanings for control and subordination. This is a separation from their usual exhaustive binary theoretical ideations that make them tools of oppressive/repressive relations of power. They are strategies of pleasure against standard simple gratification of pleasure which opens a possibility to strategically illicit new pleasures in self-surpassing through communication and solidarity with others.

Perhaps the most obvious contemporary example of the dysappearance of what I take to be resistant BDSM in the larger cultural/theoretical conversation comes in the form of E.L. James' *50 Shades of Grey*. This trilogy which touted itself as BDSM, coupled with the most visible kink-phobic responses and avid voyeuristic enthusiasm that it garnered in the mainstream combined to render invisible the ethically and politically problematic aspects of heteronormative courtship present in the power dynamics that frame Christian and Anastasia's [abusive] 'relationship' as well as the resistant content of *existing* BDSM praxis. It is important to note that *50 Shades of Grey* began as fan-fiction erotica based in the *Twilight* series. As such, it isn't a stretch to identify *50 Shades* as a repackaged version of heteronormativity with just enough of a veneer of *otherness*, facilitated by its appropriation of BDSM imagery, to make it titillating but also easily dismissed as more morally problematic than the "normal"

dynamics that are really making up the content of the story. These dynamics might be characterized by the automatic assumption of roles in the contract, and the absolute disregard that Christian has for his socio-economic positions of privilege, all while he utilizes them to stalk and corner Anastasia into associating with him. One of the factors that ultimately prompted me to write on this topic for my thesis was how the popularity of *50 Shades* garnered such immediate and intense criticism from both radical feminists and kinksters alike, and nowhere were the voices louder than the communities where these two groups blur. This is because *50 Shades* is not BDSM, even if it were it is not the resistant BDSM that can be and is being practiced in some circles. *50 Shades* is rebranded normative sexuality and courtship practice with just enough of a veneer of *other* to allow its audience to consume it and reassure themselves that “*that is rape*,” effectively turning the non-normative practices coopted from BDSM into a scapegoat for the disavowed violence and power relations that facilitate abuses that are less visible, but certainly are pervasive in a hetero-sexist rape culture.

As an undergraduate philosophy student of Feminist, Queer, and Frankfurt School Critical Theory I’m accustomed to discussions of social power, the body, control, and domination. Many philosophers have written through Freud or in response to Freud and as a result we have much writing about desire, but there is a dearth of writing on bodies and pleasures³. Thinkers of resistance in Feminist, Queer, and Frankfurt School Critical Theory are most compelling to me because of the way that each discipline has sought to refocus on the body as a site of both cultural inscription

³ Examples that do call for further exploration include: McWhorter, Ladelle. *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1999. Print. & Roth, Martha. *Arousal: Bodies and Pleasures*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 1998. Print.

and as an *existent* potential for resistance. However, I have also noted that there is a latent conception of pleasure, rooted in Freud that is present in much of the philosophical writing on sexuality. This has functioned to preclude BDSM from theories of embodied resistance because what has been prioritized is a co-opted image of BDSM, like the one given to us in *50 Shades*. For this reason, I will start my project by looking at Theodor Adorno's treatment of power and subjectivity in the first chapters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I will call this section *Bound to Enlightenment*. This chapter will explore the development of the constitutive elements and driving rationale behind contemporary patriarchal capitalism that Adorno identified in Enlightenment's mythic rationality. The second chapter will be *Bound to Futurity* and introduce Foucault's conception of biopower and other queer theorists such as Gayle Rubin and Lee Edelman into the conversation. At this point in the project I will begin to incorporate queer theory more overtly in my thesis because it will serve as the groundwork to my treatment of BDSM in the following chapter. To this end I will seek to establish a tentative definition for what is queer, which will also carry implications/allow me to expressly explicate what I'm doing by "queering" Adorno's reading of the significance of embodied resistance as it relates to pain and control directed against atomistic subjectivity with others. The final chapter will be *Resistance (Un)Bound*, and in it I will problematize or complicate interpretations of Adorno that I take to be representative of the preemptive dismissal of the critical potential of BDSM. I will demonstrate how these forms of pleasure might actually map onto Adorno's critical categories and standards for a resistant praxis. To do this I will turn primarily to *Counterpleasures* by Karmen MacKendrick because of the way it details

several significant terms and movements in the history of western discourses of pleasure, but I will also incorporate primary source materials from kink theory and practitioners⁴. I will conclude that the disruption of teleological “good sense” when it comes to sex and pleasure offered by resistant and queer BDSM praxis, is one way of opening up again the possibility for the erotic to step beyond the coital imperative and (re)productive potential as justification for male orgasm (even to step away from orgasm as the de facto medium of erotic exchange). In a culture of seemingly always already naturalized justifications for economic and sexual abuse based in productivity and atomistic subjectivity this is significant for the development of more intersectional and nuanced conceptions of recognition, solidarity, as well as the sort of embodied resistances that are significant for both day to day and large scale political actions. Considering these possibilities, and the way in which these practices cut across and complicated divisions of class, race, nationality, gender, ability, etc. it strikes me that radical political philosophers and activists would be as remiss to preclude as to blanketly enforce a commitment to further internal exploration of BDSM as it is diversely experienced.

⁴ For this iteration of the project I was unable to include as much of this as I would have liked. Through my research I discovered that the amount of content internal to philosophy was quite limited, but do to limits on scope, time and energy I was unable to delve as deeply into the recent expansion of sociological research into these subcultures and practices.

II: Bound to Enlightenment

In his work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno offers a potent reading of the development of the constitutive elements and driving rationale behind contemporary patriarchal capitalism. Much of the weight of his analysis relies on both subtle and overt metaphors of BDSM. The themes of BDSM, including domination, mastery, and subjugation are topics of great significance, if not *the* topics, for any critical theory of non-domination for Adorno. Adorno uses these metaphors and images that are both used within and upon the BDSM community, but he perhaps misses the contextual and material differences between the two. I see Adorno's use of these metaphors as prematurely or preemptively excluding non-normative erotic practices from the field of possible modes of critical resistance. I take it that Adorno's overt intentions are to critique the presumed fated-ness of patriarchal and capitalist totality. For example, in the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the Sirens represent art and embodied pleasures that are excessive to atomistic bourgeois subjectivities that have figuratively bound themselves to 'naturalized' rationales of domination. However, I think that in this strategy Adorno strangely limits the scope of possible forms of resistance due to the negative use of BDSM *imagery* and the hasty conflation of socially totalizing forms of dominating reason with actual BDSM as it is embodied and practiced. To make the argument that BDSM can actually serve as a space of critical significance both inline with and against Adorno, I will turn to Karmen MacKendrick's work in *Counterpleasures*. MacKendrick offers a nuanced exploration of the embodied philosophical underpinnings of BDSM. Specifically, MacKendrick outlines how BDSM practice can problematize precisely the totality of the constitutive elements of

patriarchal capitalism identified by Adorno. For MacKendrick the constitutive elements of patriarchal capitalism are rooted in the very spaces of tentative critical possibility identified in Adorno's treatment of the Odyssey. By (re)opening the critical potential of pleasure in erotic practice to include BDSM the strength of Adorno's critique is not only maintained but also offers us room to critique forms of hetero and homo normativity within a patriarchal capitalist society because of the way that it destabilizes and complicates the necessity of productive identity through an investment in the body.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno claim that enlightenment itself has become mythical in the ways that it is rationalized, appealed to, and enacted within western thought. The idea of mastery is presented as central to this claim, because of the way "humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown."⁵ Enlightenment promises a true and universal mastery of nature and the human being through its own mythical character. Horkheimer and Adorno bring to the fore the mechanisms underlying cultural hegemony through their description of enlightenment's perpetuation of mythical mastery through universal mediation carried out in *identity thinking*. The logical link between fate and the 'necessary' role of the mythical hero is not only present in the "cogency of formal logic" but resides in "every rationalistic system of Western philosophy."⁶ The mythical 'oracular utterance' and the enlightenment's promise of 'mastery' hold in them "a single identical content: Wrath against those of insufficient righteousness."⁷

⁵ Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightenment seeks to judge myths. However, it is in this judgment of myth that enlightenment falls “under the spell of myth” itself.⁸ Enlightenment attempts to get out from under fate by assuming the position of a universal judge. This does not serve to liberate enlightenment from the oppressive repetition that was present in mythical fate. Enlightenment finds its subject matter in myth in order to destroy it. As this becomes further naturalized by the movement of enlightenment reason “the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects.”⁹ Here we are beginning to see how fate or (re)production, atomistic subjectivity, and totalizing rationality are linked together in their production as pillars of enlightenment’s project of unified/equivocated mastery.

Enlightenment doctrine “acknowledges nothing new under the sun” and continuously produces a universal conception, wherein “all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self preservation” for the sake of this predetermined and naturalized capitalist identitarian logic.¹⁰ Through retribution the power of fate is “incessantly” reinstated along with what “always was”. There is no difference in a system that exists through naturalized equivocation because everything exists in relation to the demands of universal exchange and the unity of enlightenment reason. This illusion is the judgment of reason that is

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

always already rationalized as being a “played out” conclusion. Enlightenment reason paradoxically operates outside of time yet the world seems to have ordered itself around it, not unlike a God. Enlightenment appears to have this universal and God-like quality by virtue of its “relating every existing thing to every other.”¹¹ It is around this assured totalization and universalization based on reason’s own regularity “which sets the boundaries to possible experience.”¹² In this paradigm there is no room for anything to assert its particularity or difference because nothing can be “identical to itself.”¹³

Amidst this dialectical movement “enlightenment dissolves away the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery (found in myth), but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation.”¹⁴ Humans experience and internalize this cycle in such a way that their own “security” as “free subjects” becomes inextricably linked to enlightenment rationality. This internalization leads them to tend toward uncritically appealing to normative enlightenment premises and mythical elements such as *productivity* and *atomistic subjectivity* as though they were the very bedrock of nature itself. Which is to say, “what appears is the triumph of subjectivity, the subjugation of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand;” to normatively sedimented subjectivities.¹⁵ Qualities are dissolved in thought and human beings are forced into conformity with a system that always already naturalizes itself through their subjectivity and its supposedly fated commitment to production. It is “under the leveling rule of abstraction,

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Ibid., 8.

¹³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

which makes everything in nature repeatable, and of industry, for which abstraction prepared the way, [that] the liberated finally themselves become the ‘herd’.”¹⁶ This abstract conformity is experienced as the conceptual groundwork for universal mastery of the world, the self, and one’s condition. This is also a model of resistance that we should be wary of.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno “measures like those taken on Odysseus’s ship in the face of the Sirens are a prescient allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment.”¹⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno problematize Enlightenment by identifying a logic of mastery or domination operating within it through the now naturalized and essentialized illusions of atomistic subjectivity and productivity. Horkheimer and Adorno criticize the external and internal forms of alienation produced through this enlightenment logic dependent on *identity thinking* and *instrumental rationality*. Their critique utilizes what they take as the norm of non-domination. This norm of non-domination situates the critical potential of their project. In their reading of *The Odyssey* they provide a powerful analysis of the connection between the creation and preservation of atomistic subjectivities (Odysseus/bourgeois/master, and his Crew/proletarian/submissive) *through restraint* (bound by rope, and ordered sensory deprivation) from *embodied pleasure* (physical investment in the Siren’s song) that would be too excessive or intense for approved subjectivities under capitalism. Critique of the present is situated around a critique of normative subjectivity, and its relation to (re)production and embodied pleasure in the guise of the threat posed by the Sirens. In their reading of this scene from *The Odyssey* Odysseus is bound and restrained to the

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27.

mast of the ship by the crewmen at his own behest. Here Odysseus is serving as an allegory for capitalist subjectivity's presumed mastery. Odysseus "listens, but does so while bound helplessly to the mast. The stronger the allurements grow the more tightly he has himself bound, just as later the bourgeois denied themselves happiness the closer it drew to them with the increase in their own power."¹⁸ The crew, ears plugged with wax and eyes averted out of fear instilled by Odysseus' orders, serve as an allegory for the proletarian subjectivity. As workers they "must look ahead with alert concentration and ignore anything which lies to one side."¹⁹ The Sirens' song is an allegory for the lure of pleasures that would necessitate a degree of embodied commitment too excessive for subjectivity constituted around a fear of pleasure's power to derail fate and fragment the 'naturalness' of their identity and its 'proper' role.

Horkheimer and Adorno wrote of this moment saying: "Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self-the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings-was created."²⁰ I don't think that the injuries spoken of here necessarily have to lead to a condemnation of BDSM practices in and of themselves. However, in his reading Adorno casts commanding and bound Odysseus as the exemplar of bourgeois subjectivity, and problematizes him as a mythical sadist/dom/switch. The crew is taken up as proletarian subjects in the role of the masochist/submissive. I propose prioritizing the disruptive potential of the Sirens' song as a manifold and excessive allegory for embodied pleasures. Odysseus restrains himself and his crew through various strategic acts of cunning so that they can pass the

¹⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹⁹ Ibid., 26.

²⁰ Ibid., 26.

Sirens ‘safely’. These acts of cunning are intended provide ‘safety’ by conquering nature. Within these acts pleasure is transformed into something for mediated speculation alone, never through joyous abandon. Within this context pleasure is not something towards which one should risk one’s body, future, and identity. The negative weight placed on the BDSM imagery in the critique precludes the potential to see its embodied practice as being akin to the resistant elements of the Siren’s song that disrupt the logics at play in naturalized relations of domination at which Adorno is striking. BDSM is in fact a potential form of the embodied resistance to normative subjectivity/logic hinted at by the threat perceived in the Sirens’ song by Adorno, despite his conscious or unconscious dismissal of BDSM.

MacKendrick situates her project of disruption around “pleasures-pleasures that run contrary to expectations of pleasure in so many ways.”²¹ In particular, BDSM practice disrupts normative (teleological) expectations of the subject in regards to embodied pleasure, such as “the tyranny of the (capitalist) economic (which has made even erotic pleasure a matter of exchange, implicitly artifactual and quantifiable orgasms, and ideally of re/production.”²² I am particularly interested in her reading of sadomasochism’s role in this project because of the way that it is rooted in terms of the body and the risk/resistant potential BDSM poses to normative subjectivity. According to MacKendrick “there is an explosive quality to these pleasures that goes beyond possible aims of a subject.”²³ Pleasure is not inherently productive, but instead has a polymorphous power to disrupt atomistic subjectivity. Sadomasochism, as one

²¹ MacKendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 1999. Print. 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

multifaceted mode of embodied counterpleasure, denies pleasure as normatively understood (purely coital, with fixed gender roles, reproductive in function and justification, and heavily focused on [male] orgasm) and can operate against simple gratification of acceptable desire by challenging the traditional and accepted ‘ends’ or justifications of sexuality. MacKendrick demonstrates the distinction between disempowering forms of social and political bondage that we are born into and the resistance potential and critical perspective that can come from BDSM praxis.

Given that the key constitutive elements of the enlightenment logic of domination that Adorno and Horkheimer seek to critique are identified as universal equivocation, atomistic subjectivity, and the naturalized teleological givenness of the re/production of these elements we can see how MacKendrick’s project relates. If we apply Adorno’s points of critique to the field of the erotic we can see how elements of normative discourse on sexuality are indeed centered on equivocating all sexual practices. MacKendrick, citing Vaneigem, “notes that the socially acceptable forms of pleasure, especially erotic pleasure, have been limited to what is at least potentially re/productive.”²⁴ A key element of BDSM is the way that its practice, like “all of the counterpleasures both refuse some more customary conception of pleasure and strategically construct a new pleasure in self-surpassing.” Which is to say that “the practices of restraint (both bondage and control) defy the “natural” (and calming) teleology of the subject’s desire; such practices are unnatural, unproductive, inefficient, self-destructive-and powerful.”²⁵ What MacKendrick suggests of BDSM as it is practiced is the same threat that the Siren’s song held for Odysseus and his crew. To

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 106.

stake, to *engage*, one's body in pleasures that are outside of the limits of what *should be* under the weight of enlightenment rationality produces "two related forms of overcoming: the overcoming of subjectivity and of the discipline of productive efficiency."²⁶ There is clearly a strong point of overlap between MacKendrick's description of counterpleasures and Adorno's critique. If we can understand BDSM practice in terms of MacKendrick's project we can see how (hetero/homo) normative sexuality follows the logic problematized by Adorno. It prioritizes the atomistic subjectivity and efficient/productive futurity that perpetuate stagnation and violence around preconfigured and 'naturalized' identity. For MacKendrick's account of BDSM and for Adorno's description of the Siren song "the pleasure of [counterpleasures'] overcoming is out of the will--not the autonomous, subject centered free will with which we are comfortably familiar..."²⁷ but a resistant and "paradoxically powerful pleasure of the subject pushing toward and beyond the transgression of its own limits."²⁸ Resistance can find itself (un)bound.

²⁶ Ibid., 106.

²⁷ Ibid., 106.

²⁸ Ibid., 106.

III: Bound to Futurity

Sexuality is a site of control and resistance with political significance because of the ways in which it is a point of convergence between discipline and bio-power. Foucault describes this convergence in detail in the final chapter of *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. Key features of Foucault's project center around essentialized atomistic subjectivity, and efficient productivity/reproduction at the level of the population. I see this as mapping onto the reification of conceptions of re/production and futurity in sexual and political/economic practice. In *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, Foucault articulates a method from which he describes how politics is about reproduction as understood through the fostering of life at the level of population. For Foucault, a key component of contemporary politics is sexuality. Therefore, sexuality is inherently imbued with political power. What Foucault identifies in his analysis of sexuality is a conception of power that consists of mutual relationality between the limits of politics/economy and sexuality. Resistance takes the form of embodied practices that deconstruct conceptions of sexuality by expanding them beyond their limits through corporeal pleasure, which is to say outside of reproduction. In Foucault's words, "it is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance."²⁹

In this section I will argue that the disruption of teleological "good sense" opens up the possibility for the erotic to step beyond reproduction (both biologically and

²⁹ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. 157.

socially). As such, BDSM is a viable mode of resistance with critical potential. I am not arguing that it is a silver bullet, or a set of practices that everyone can or should adopt. I merely am asserting that it is a viable option. I am not seeking to universalize anew, but to resist the way that BDSM praxis has been overtly and inadvertently precluded from the space of critical philosophies.³⁰ In this section I will first give a gloss on Foucault's work in the last chapter of *The History of Sexuality* focusing on the relationship between individual, population, and sexuality. This is important to the project because if any embodied sexuality is to be resistant to social power it must be demonstrated that there is at least a link between these two poles. Second, I will transition into 'anti-social queer theory' with a turn to Lee Edelman. I supplement my reading of Foucault with Edelman because I find that he unpacks a social/political framework that identifies how the figure of the child has become the teleologically prioritized symbol of the future qua normative sexual desire. By reading the trope of the child as a symbol for the seemingly totalizing value attributed to life as political/social futurity Edelman describes the ways that the capacity for (re)production sets the contemporary limits for the 'properly' sexual and political. This helps to elucidate why, from the normative position of 'good sense' which is always already heteronormative (arguably even in the case of homonormativity), pleasures pursued/desired without an eye to posterity are scorned, but can be quite powerful forms of resistant bodily pleasure. Finally, I will look to Foucault's interviews and MacKendrick's book *Counterpleasures* to discuss how BDSM practices are a viable mode of resistance. These pleasures are modes of resistance given that they disturb and multiply the givenness of sex and sexuality in our

³⁰ Ideally I will expand this project in the future to incorporate a more detailed history of the development and uptake of the disappearance of pain and restraint in critical philosophies.

current biopolitical framework. Their disruptive potential occurs precisely in terms of the resistant conceptions of bodies and pleasures outlined by Foucault in *History of Sexuality*, and separate interviews.

Beginning in the seventeenth century the first of the two poles of biopower to form was a focus on the conception of the body as a machine. This pole was expressed through its “disciplining, the optimization of its capacities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility...” as well as its incorporation into systems of efficient economic controls, all this was ensured through the *disciplines of an anatomo-politics of the human body*.³¹ It follows I will be arguing that neither the pleasure of the top nor of the bottom is pleasure in ‘usefulness’ or ‘docility’. In the case of the second pole, which formed later, focus centered not on the individual human body but on what Foucault identifies as the *species body*. The species body was conceived as being “imbued with the mechanics of life” and as such serves as the basis of the biological process which is identified in and through: “propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity...” and the conditions that lead to the potential variation of these categories. The management of these characteristics of the *species body* was carried out “through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*.”³² Foucault holds the *disciplines of the body* and *regulations of the population* as the two poles around which constitutive elements of the organization of power over life was deployed.

These poles’ relation to one another, established throughout the course of the classical age, is characterized by Foucault as a “great bipolar technology” that was at

³¹ Ibid., 139.

³² Ibid., 139.

once “anatomic and biological, individualizing and specifying, directed toward the performances of the body, with attention to the processes of life.”³³ Foucault identifies a form of power where the function was no longer to take life or let live, but to “invest life through and through.”³⁴ Sovereign power was being carefully supplanted through the administration of bodies under the domain of the first pole, and through the calculated management of life through the administration of the species body under the domain of the second pole. The development of multiple institutions of discipline during the classical age, such as universities, barracks, workshops along with the emergence of politically and economically motivated concern for the problems of birthrate, longevity, housing, and migration constituted, for Foucault, “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of ‘bio-power’.”³⁵ Discreet individuals’ actions became conducted “as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” each with recourse at the level of the population.

According to Foucault, “the notion of “sex” made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere.”³⁶ This collectivizing of biopolitical institutions made sex “the line of contact between a

³³ Ibid., 139.

³⁴ Ibid., 139.

³⁵ Ibid., 140.

³⁶ Ibid., 154.

knowledge of human sexuality and the biological sciences of reproduction” which now “serve as a principle of normality for human sexuality.”³⁷ Pleasure is thereby arrested within these normative identities, and it is generally understood that ‘real’ sex and ‘healthy’ sexuality of ‘proper’ subjects is clearly defined in relation to the perpetuation of the life of the population so conceived. This poses a problem for Foucault, because “the possibility of using our bodies as a possible source of the very numerous pleasures is something that is very important.”³⁸ One of the effects of limiting or producing a legitimated pleasure through rigid definitions of sex/sexuality along normative lines is also to produce a stagnant set of tools and perceptions of the ways that we can relate our conducts towards one another, which traps us in the reproduction of a particular set of power relations. This is troubling for those who would seek or take themselves as having identified practices that are outside of relations of power. As an example, “the rights that derived from marital and family relations are a way of stabilizing and rendering stationary certain forms of conduct; as Foucault says, extending these rights to other persons is but a first step, since ‘if one asks people to reproduce marriage bonds in order for their personal relation to be recognized, the progress realized is slight.’”³⁹ If politics is the governing of conducts, then the force of any counter conducts “modify force relations between individuals, by acting on the possibilities of action.”⁴⁰ Within Foucault’s framework queerness is both a politically and theoretically apt example of counter-conduct.

³⁷ Ibid., 154-5.

³⁸ Foucault, Michel (1997) ‘Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity’ in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Penguin: London. 165.

³⁹ Davidson, A. (2011). In praise of counter-conduct. *History of the Human Sciences*, (4), 25-41. 33.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 29.

Eve Sedgwick's article *Christmas Effects* explores a possible interpretation for the term queer through examining the normative expectation of family and sexuality, which I take to be solid examples of biopower in operation. Sedgwick reveals the weight of family and sexuality, as they are generally deployed, by denoting the seemingly totalizing number of social, religious, and governmentally situated institutions and expectations that are operating under their surface. She notes that during Christmas in the United States in particular "all institutions are speaking with one voice."⁴¹ Theology, the state, commerce, Dow Jones, media, and news become a buzz with annual shifts. There are legal holidays, longer hiatuses from school, special postage stamps, increased consumer purchasing that drives companies into 'the black' for the year (which the stock markets love), the media begins a litany of Christmas and holiday themed images and stories while the news weaves its own content with similar narratives. Will the troops be home for Christmas? Will congress still be in session? What about their families? As all of this combines "the pairing family/Christmas becomes increasingly tautological, as families more and more constitute themselves according to the schedule, and in the endlessly iterated image, of the holiday itself constituted in the image of the family."⁴² The image of the family itself is constituted of a set of institutions or expectations that are supposed to just naturally align and reproduce themselves. Above and beyond the most common interpretation of family, the family that is recognized during Christmas, is a social unit that shares:

"as surname, a sexual dyad, a legal unit based on state regulated marriage, a circuit of blood relationships... a building, a proscenium

⁴¹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Christmas Effects*. Tendencies. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993. Print. 5-9.

⁴² Ibid., 5-6.

between ‘private’ and ‘public’, an economic unit of earning and taxation, the prime site of economic consumption, the prime site of cultural consumption, a mechanism to produce/care for/ and enculturate children... a site of patriotic formation.”⁴³

Similarly, with sexual identity:

“your biological (e.g., chromosomal) sex, male or female; your self-perceived gender assignment, male or female (supposed to be the same as your biological sex); the preponderance of your traits of personality and appearance, masculine or feminine (supposed to correspond to your sex and gender); the biological sex of your partner” their gender assignment, and identification, “the masculinity or femininity of your partner (supposed to be the opposite of your own);... your procreative choice (supposed to be yes if straight, no if gay); your preferred sexual act(s) (supposed to be insertive if you are male or masculine and receptive if female or feminine); your most eroticized sexual organs (supposed to correspond to the procreative capabilities of your sex, and your insertive/receptive assignment);... your enjoyment of power in sexual relations (supposed to be low if you are female or feminine, high if male or masculine)... ”⁴⁴

are supposed to be organized into a “seamless and univocal whole.”⁴⁵ It is when these and other assumed or presumed connections internal to social and political units or identities are not conducive, or impossible to be made to “signify monolithically” that Sedgwick suggests her tentative application of the term queer.⁴⁶ Sedgwick also points to the very real practice of uncoupling these underlying institutional expectations from one another on the part of a queer subject through the de-articulation of terms like family and sexuality by disassociating and or acknowledging the ways that their constitutive elements don’t make sense next to each other when describing their practices. In this definition Sedgwick links normative political forces to sexuality and family and the potential for queer experience and practice to disrupt the monolithic character of these

⁴³ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

groups of institutions. This helps us to see how it is appropriate to discuss BDSM practice as a queer mode of sexuality, in that it destabilizes hetero and homo-normative sexuality as they relate to normative biopolitical institutions through embodied practices. The articulation of queer sexuality as Foucauldian counter-conduct outlined by Sedgwick offers a turn away from re/production as the mediating justification for any given sexual practice. This re/production-as justification-is articulated by Edelman in his essay *The Future is Kid Stuff*.

In *The Future is Kid Stuff* Edelman unpacks a social/political framework that he identifies as unfailingly turning to the figure of the child as the prioritized symbol of the future. According to Edelman, “the child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and been enshrined as the figure for whom that order must be held in perpetual trust.”⁴⁷ By reading the trope of the child as a symbol for the seemingly totalizing value attributed to political/social futurity we can describe the ways that the capacity for (re)production sets the limits for the political. In fact, “the image (of the child itself... and its coercive universalization, works to discipline political discourse by consigning it always to accede in advance to the reality of the collective futurity...” at the level of the population.⁴⁸ This helps to elucidate why, from the normative position of ‘good sense’ (which is always already heteronormative), pleasures pursued without an eye to posterity are scorned. One result is that “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of the future without

⁴⁷ Edelman, Lee. "The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive." Narrative 6.1 (1998): 18-33. Print. 21.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

the figure of the child.”⁴⁹ It is important to note that I think this is an investment in a futurity that is based on the values and presumed resource availability/distributions of the past/present. It is a future that is blind to real change and is as repetitive and stagnant as the abstracted figure of the child that it is built on. The claim to queerness, or critique from a queer space is predicated on “determined opposition to this underlying structure of the political-[queer sexualities’] opposition, that is, to the fantasmatic ambition of achieving symbolic closure, through the marriage of identity to futurity, in order to reproduce the social subject.”⁵⁰ Just as no ‘good’ subject can argue (or would argue) in favor of abortion, no ‘good’ subject can claim an experience of sexuality that is not ultimately legitimated politically, based on its relation to the (re)production of ‘good’ political and social subjects. I find that MacKendrick articulates the resistance potential of BDSM, as queer counter-conduct, based on these practices’ disruption of the teleological necessity of sexuality figured for and around the child.

MacKendrick, as we have already seen, also notes that the socially acceptable forms of pleasure, especially erotic pleasure, have been limited to what is at least potentially re/productive.”⁵¹ Counterpleasures are disruptive of these teleologies because “they are pleasures in which the unquestionably erotic is in no way reducible to the genital.”⁵² A key element of BDSM is the way that its practice, like “all of the counterpleasures both refuse some more normalized conception of pleasure and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁵¹ MacKendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 1999. Print. 3.

⁵² Ibid., 146.

strategically construct a new pleasure in self-surpassing.”⁵³ Which is to say that “the practices of restraint (both bondage and control) defy the “natural” (and calming) teleology of the subject’s desire; such practices are unnatural, unproductive, inefficient, self-destructive-and powerful.”⁵⁴ To give one’s body over to pleasures that are outside of the limits of what *should be* under the weight of biopolitical control produces “two related forms of overcoming: the overcoming of subjectivity and of the discipline of productive efficiency.”⁵⁵ There is clearly a strong point of overlap between MacKendrick’s description of counterpleasures, and Foucault’s critique, in particular in the content of his interviews on power, pleasure, the political, and S&M.

For Foucault, “the intensities of pleasure are indeed linked to the fact that you desubjugate yourself, that you cease being a subject, an identity.”⁵⁶ The existence and proliferation of S&M insists “that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on” that fracture the presumably always already naturalized proper sexual identity.⁵⁷ Foucault expressly states that the powers operating in S&M relations are distinct from social powers operating at the level of the population, because “what characterizes [social] power is the fact that it is a strategic relation which has been stabilized through institutions,” and “the S&M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation but it is always fluid.”⁵⁸ In normative sexuality “the strategic relations come before sex. And in S&M

⁵³ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 106

⁵⁵ Ibid., 106.

⁵⁶ Foucault, Michel ; Le Bitoux, Jean ; Morar, Nicolae & Smith, Daniel W. (2011). *The Gay Science*. Critical Inquiry 37 (3):385-403. 399-400.

⁵⁷ Foucault, Michel (1997) ‘Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity’ in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Penguin: London. 165.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 169.

the strategic relations are inside sex, as a convention of pleasure within a particular situation.”⁵⁹ This is an important distinction, because in the first case “the strategic relations are purely social relations, and it is your social being that is involved; while, in the other case, it is your body that is involved.”⁶⁰

If we can understand BDSM practice in the terms of MacKendrick’s project we can see how normative sexuality follows a logic that prioritizes atomistic subjectivity and efficient/productive futurity that perpetuate both stagnation and violence. It appears that for Foucault and MacKendrick “the pleasure of [counterpleasures’] overcoming is out of the will--not the autonomous, subject centered free will with which we are comfortably familiar...” but a resistant and “paradoxically powerful pleasure of the subject pushing toward and beyond the transgression of its own limits.”⁶¹ Pleasure is not merely a mono-directional affair that follows the conception that “pleasures of the flesh, are always drinking, eating, and fucking.”⁶² BDSM radically expands the possible scope of embodied pleasure in a way that destabilizes the status of identity politics by occupying a space outside of productive and therefore justified sexuality.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 170.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁶¹ Ibid., 106.

⁶² Foucault, Michel (1997) ‘Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity’ in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Penguin: London. 165.

IV: Resistance (Un)Bound

Perhaps the two most widely discussed and misunderstood elements of what has been designated as BDSM are restraint (bondage and control) and pain as they are experienced and deployed in a scene. These themes are present throughout much social/political theory regardless of whether said theory is overtly against BDSM or is more subtly recreating what I take to be conceptions of pleasure that unnecessarily preclude BDSM as a viable mode of resistance. That is why in this chapter I will focus on the particular forms and strategies by which restraint and pain are simultaneously experienced and deployed within a BDSM scene by the bodies at play. I will examine this from the perspective of a submissive as well as a dominant, but in so doing I will complicate the common conception that these are absolute and diametrically opposed relations of power. This will lead me to push for a more nuanced analysis of the experience of a switch as an important queering of even BDSM's provisional identities. To finish off the chapter I will return to Foucault more overtly, via Jana Sawiki, to discuss the place of this theory and these practices in relation to discussions in feminism that have seem to have produced a problematic split between "radical" moralist dogmatism grounded in identity politics, and a "libertarian" pluralism under which anything is permitted.

I'm not interested in advocating for a conception of the erotic that sees itself as outside of power. Not only is this not possible, I don't think that it would be desirable. I also don't agree with the conception that masochism is "the eroticization of

powerlessness”⁶³, but is instead an invitation to develop a sense of power as *strength*. There is a pervasive impression that to bottom is to resign oneself to be meek, passive, and undemanding (at the very least if one bottoms one is somehow taken to have given up all forms of strength, activity, and the right to have demands or conditions). Because of this pain and restraint (control, and bondage) are commonly conceived in the negative, especially for the submissive. This is because it is incomprehensible that someone could “voluntarily” find joy in these sensations, or if they do that they are merely acting in bad-faith or have proven that they are more susceptible to cultural inscription and false-consciousness than their more “vanilla” counterparts. What seems to underlie many of these concerns is a commitment to some conception of an authentically free subjectivity that exists to be uncovered beneath layers of excessive cultural conditioning. Practitioners in role plays that appear to reconstruct aesthetics and relations of power in a scene using tropes of social power dynamics might seem to be reinforcing oppressive norms, but I would argue that the explicit stylization, communication, and intensification that create the bedrock of a scene (just as much as the pervasive cultural inspirations) are important to consider. This is because these elements reinforce the reality that while there is material force to these cultural relations that produce affective and aesthetic instantiations, these are profoundly un-Natural (in spite of how much would be totalizing relations of power are institutionally naturalized into certain bodies). This is why it makes increasingly less sense in the BDSM space

⁶³ A phrase that I have heard in the context of a discussion with a trans-femme activist and organizer who served as her local Imperial Sovereign Court of the Emerald Empire’s [ISCEE] Leather Titleholder. [ISCEE] is a chapter of the Imperial/International Court System which is one of the oldest LGBT organizations in the world. A Leather Titleholder tends to represent the leather/kink community of the given chapter.

that I am talking about to speak of “feminine” or “masculine” desire as universal and natural, and it is quite common to reverse, combine, juxtapose, and transgress gender/sex categories in the course of a scene. To ignore the *strategic* stylization, and dramatic intensification of these elements of BDSM in a communicative context also functions to reinforce the patriarchal narrative that rapists are exclusively strange men in bushes and not partners, acquaintances, or family. Sexual violence in its most statistically prevalent, and least acknowledge forms are rarely so overtly *stylized* or *intensified*, and are frequently justified through appeals to natural and universal masculine or feminine sexuality. Pain and restraint for the submissive can be resistant to enlightenment logics of identity and efficient productive futurity in that these are *strategies* of “a force of desire that creates and seeks out resistance in order to have the pleasure of growth, attained only in overcoming (often, in fact ideally, of itself).”⁶⁴ This is the paradox and power of a desire that opens the subject to push toward and beyond its own limits. Restraint and pain are here being deployed to enhance a pleasure in the growth of the will to power by playing with and redirecting desire.

Restraint, and pleasure *in* it, already carries with it evocative senses of tension, and resistance that are normatively interpreted to inhibit pleasure’s efficient arrival at its teleological closure. Pleasure is supposed to ameliorate and relieve tension/stress. In an Aristotelian and Epicurean sense the virtuous life is pleasurable because it is attained by one who carefully moderates and minimizes pain. For Foucault the disciplined subject is “efficient, productive, working under the imperative of complete use- of time, space,

⁶⁴ MacKendrick, Karmen. Counterpleasures. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 1999. Print. 106.

and body.”⁶⁵ In this sense discipline is “the unitary technique by which the body is reduced as a ‘political’ force at the least cost and maximized as a useful force.”⁶⁶ As such, bodies are at once made identifiable by and as consumer objects. This teleological discipline interacts with the construction of desires in at least two ways. Firstly, such a culture prioritizes and valorizes actions on/and of bodies that are quick, and efficient in their gratification undermining the subversive power of pleasure to distract and render subjects undisciplined. This is exactly the logic implemented by Odysseus with his men when he ordered them to block their ears to the call of the sirens. The second impact on desire, as it is commonly conceived, is the imperative that “desire is directed to ends that uphold the established order and secure it in its functioning” whereby it is recognized as productive.⁶⁷ Politically correct pleasure can be generalized through these two forms as quick and productive *gratification*. Be it gratification derived from the efficient production of orgasm(s), or the bio/social (re)production of the figure of the child qua hetero/homo normativity. The question remains, how can this will be resistant to the seemingly totalizing power of patriarchal capitalist disciplinary culture? I think that the answer lies in the distinction between a desire that seeks gratification, or pre-empted satisfaction and a desire for satisfaction in nongratification. In pain and restraint desire can be re-routed away from satisfaction so understood. This is because “pleasure in restraint, restraint that *provokes* the power of joyous resistance, cannot be identical with the power that seeks to *forestall* resistance.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁶ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977. Print. 221.

⁶⁷ MacKendrick, Karmen. *Counterpleasures*. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 1999. Print. 110.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 107.

Desire for the denial enabled by restraint is not dependant upon a repression of desire. Masochism as it is practiced/experienced in a resistant context, starting in pleasure, is distinct from oppression because of this. Restraint and pain can in fact be *strategies* of resistance because they are “a manipulation of the power of desire, a manipulation that neither undoes or denies that power, but maximizes it to maximize the body’s improbable if unlasting triumph against its subjection-its subjectivity- its disciplinary productivity, its “natural” and “moral” order.”⁶⁹ Control and bondage are strategies of intensification that forestall gratification and allow one to stay with any number of sensations longer than one could do on their own. It is a common practice amongst (usually cis-men) who, in order to “let” and/or “make” their female partner come through vaginal penetration will dissociate and describe strategies for lasting longer that include counting or doing long division in their heads. I take this to be an incredibly strong denial of the body, and one’s partner even in an attempt at some misguided altruism. In BDSM orgasm control and/or orgasm denial are common practices, especially in edge-play, but restraint and pain operate to forestall release, not by turning away from the body or denying its sensations but by further investing in a continuous physicality avid for the intensity of prolonged nongratification, facilitated through pain and restraint. Through the exploration of nongratification to the point of intensity, which has been valued as both useless and excessive, resistance emerges as the socially reified (and manipulable) pleasures of *gratification* lose their givenness. This is how pain and restraint can divert energy from the goal-oriented genitality so often labeled as properly male.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 107.

It is important that I make note that the existence of this masochistic will, manifest through *strength* qua a seeking out of that which can and will resist it, does not mean that all restraint or pain is good/subversive. MacKendrick characterizes this nicely: “violence and restraint imposed against desire fail entirely to be the strategic manipulation of desire (by desire...) which is at once provocative and intensifying.”⁷⁰ Pain, in and of itself, can be experienced (or used) as a (means to invoke) *loss* of subjectivity. However, this is drastically different from the experience of the masochist in a scene. Without the power of the masochist’s paradoxical move against its own limits this is no longer a pleasurable *abandon* of subjectivity beyond its limits, but an assault. No subject can exceed itself as a radically independent agent, however pain and restraint can remind us that “our flesh may surpass our subjectivity, that we are stronger and more powerful than our selves.”⁷¹ In order for there to be an explosive intensification of desire through the forestalling of satisfaction and the excessive expense of energy in pain or restraint desire must be present and carried forward from the beginning. What is required in the violence of resistant BDSM play is not that one be *torn* from oneself, but that one be allowed and encouraged to *abandon* oneself which requires seeking out and fostering risk awareness, sensitivity, and responsivity to and with yourself and others.

To revel in these forms of overtly joyful power-play is subversive of larger power structures at least partially because of the distinction that can be drawn between the rules of a game and the codes of Law. To break from the law is to incur a penalty without recourse, but to transgress the rules of a game merely removes one from the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 120-1.

⁷¹ Ibid., 108.

game. Control is present in the relations between the dom and sub because of the fact that there are in fact rules to their games. Even the rules established around punishments for breaking the provisional rules of a scene are still internal to the game, and not a *law* of desire. To step out of a scene is to step back into the order of law, while “to play with full devotion to the rules is to suspend for a moment the seemingly greater force of law before the seductiveness of serious play, serious enough to treat the rule as if it were law.”⁷²

For a top, pleasure is intensified through a desire that is equally about *rule-giving* as much as about *responsivity* towards/from another and the destabilization of subjectivity and productivity brought about by this paradox in a context of mutually joyous pain and restraint. Since power is relational and is expressed as such through the materiality of bodies, a dom’s desire is for its own embodied expenditure of strength. This is not a random expenditure of vitality into an empty space, that would not be pleasurable, nor could it even prompt an experience of the intensification of expanding strength in the sense that I am talking about. Under such hypothetical conditions there would not be a relationality under which power could subversively expand, let alone exist in order to subjugate oneself or others, in the Foucauldian sense. Because of this a resistant top requires that their capacity for expenditure meet “some *receptivity*-something, some other force, must exist to *respond*.”⁷³ Pleasure, shared through the intensification of pain and restraint-held in tension in a movement of nongratification-fosters a need for developing increased and diversifiable/open conceptions of communication. It is a common practice across many kinds of scenes for practitioners to

⁷² Ibid., 132.

⁷³ Ibid., 127.

focus on precise communication (“stand in this particular way so that I can do this particular thing” “describe how such and such feels”) communicating/connecting physically and verbally to give directions as well as to ask questions takes up a lot of time before, during, and after a scene.

In a scene, when a bottom is interpreted as already having been deprived of or having given over *all* of *their* power to the dom’s *autonomy* something seems to me to be precluded. It might be more appropriate to think of this as the bottom strengthening their own power, power *as control*, by running it through another (the top). It is important to note that this is *not* to say that all power is given over, or should be seen as having been given over to the top. This is absolutely a temporary and fleeting exchange situated in a scene, and never to be used to justify something outside of the scene or for ignoring a safeword or negative responsivity on the part of the bottom or top. In some ways this is very much a strategy of pitting oneself against oneself with and through trust and solidarity with another. For the resistant top *taking* on this responsibility of control is just as importantly a *giving* over to the responsivity of the submissive. Many who seek to criticize all pain and restraint, regardless of context, tend to see a dom as only imposing their will through a resentment (conscious or otherwise), which seeks to destroy or undermine the strength of the sub. For MacKendrick this makes little sense when applied to resistant and mutually pleasurable scenes because “to impose repressive power is to top nonresponsively.”⁷⁴ Pleasure for the top is never directed towards producing a reaction against, but rather directs energy toward that which the bottom’s power will respond to through their strength expressed as joyous responsivity.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 129.

An important sense of the expansion of power for the top comes from the realization and practice of this very response-ability. Rather than asking what is in it for the bottom (usually asked in a dismissive kind of pity), a more pertinent question (and a question/issue frequently discussed in BDSM circles) might actually be what is in it for the top? This is because of the enormous amount of expenditure required to give the strong bottom the sensations and conditions they desire.

While the “giving” that is the resistant top’s is never wholly their own, this role is more than just facilitative work on the part of the dom for the sake of a demanding or greedy bottom. The control being expended by the resistant top is never finalized in a universal order. At its most subversive it is undertaken as a control of “an ever shifting situation, a fluctuating play of forces, and *depends* for its exertion upon the desire to *keep* those forces at play, to escalate them beyond control.”⁷⁵ This is expressly an active control, active responsivity is desired by both, but required of the “master” who finds strength in not badgering, or destroying/negating the strength of the sub, but in responding and shifting with its expansion (thereby reaching new conceptions of their own capabilities/strengths). Similar to the masochist, the intensification that this requires demands the perceptual distancing of gratification up to, and beyond the perceived limits of an atomistic stable subjectivity. The resistant top expends itself in disregard of efficient satisfaction as defined in a normative encounter because “the transgressive economy of excess links joy and desire such that one cannot increase

⁷⁵ Ibid., 131.

without the other, and joy becomes not gratification (the teleological artifact of orgasm) but intensification.”⁷⁶

It is a common occurrence in the limited theory of BDSM, both internal and external in origins, that doms and subs are written about as two radically distinct populations. It is often taken for granted that each desire sums up the totality of each sub or dom’s proclivities, but this absolutely indicates a misunderstanding of BDSM praxis. This view is often used to argue that doms are essentially predators and masochists are inherently victims. In point of fact it is quite common for these two theoretical categories to share practitioners who move between practices and roles depending on partner, situation, mood, whim, etc. (even in the same scene). Even when these practices are not pursued simultaneously in a single body dom-in expresses masochistic pleasure through the exertion of strength held in escalation and repetition forestalling gratification, and sub-in expresses sadistic pleasure as its resistance and strength demand further excitation also in a resistance to gratification. A particularly salient example, though not the only manifestation, of this dynamic comes in the form of impact-play or sensation-play+bondage. It takes a lot of effort on both sides and each side’s desire is amplified through the other’s desire to continue for one more minute, or one more impact. These are pleasures that in their relationality really do fall into and out of each other with perversely non-dualistic potency. The switch is an entirely underdeveloped figure in the theory, but certainly one whose presence in practice calls for a more nuanced account of BDSM as something other than a clear-cut repetition of socially/historically naturalized dualistic ideals of power.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 126.

To further situate these pleasures and the conception of power that they seem to warrant it would be pertinent to return to a discussion of their relation to other traditions within feminist philosophy and what would appear to be their mutually polarizing views of power. Those whom we might tentatively group together as “radical” feminists argue for sexual equality through respect for subjectivity and body. Respect in this paradigm would require the elimination of any forms of sexuality wherein objectification takes place. “Libertarian” feminists argue for any practices of opposition that are identifiable as transgressing social respectability in regards to sexuality without drawing the line on what is correct sexuality. For Jana Sawicki both of these positions, despite their seeming opposition, both carry underlying conceptions of power as exclusively repressive. “Radical” or “sex-negative” philosophies as they would come to be identified tend to attribute “male dominance to male biology⁷⁷” and femininity with “women’s biological role in procreation.”⁷⁸ Male sexuality is biologically associated with affirmation of male subjectivity through a natural tendency towards violence, objectification, and orgasm. Female sexuality is mirrored in this biological binary as nurturing, receptive, and nongenital.⁷⁹ Sexual liberation accordingly takes shape only in female spaces that have been “liberated” where “a natural and inherently good female sexuality” has been released from the repressive “male sexuality based on coercion and violence.”⁸⁰ “Libertarian” feminists also express this form of traditional repressive conceptions of power. For them “the primary obstacle to sexual freedom...is the

⁷⁷ This is an excerpt from a condensed definition offered by Ann Ferguson in her book “Sex Wars” pg 108.

⁷⁸ Diamond, Irene. *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1988. Print. 179.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

existence of normative hierarchies of sexual expression that inhibit the release of inherently liberatory (or benign) sexual energy.”⁸¹ By relying on repressive models of power both groups dehistoricize, and overly simplify how desire is constructed and resisted under patriarchal capitalism. While radicals “are asking us to wait until male-controlled sexuality has been overthrown” libertarians fail to account for the “dangers that accompany female sexual exploration in a sexist society.”⁸²

Members of both camps have deployed models of repression that also incorporate a rejection of an autonomous sexual drive in favor of a conception inclusive of the socially constructed nature of desire. While the same essentialisms can and do reappear even in social constructionist theories this formation is at least more open to the fact that desires can change or be transformed (at least in theory). The problems arise for me in that on one side we have a conception of power that is socially constructed but now discussed as *existing* “centralized in male institutions and as possessed by men.”⁸³ Resistance in this view would only be possible through a unified and total overturning of the of social structures that shape women’s lives liberating *true* sexual self-determination. This denies the diversity of sexual practices of complicated subjects in the present, in favor a utopian ideal that often leads to unambiguous “overemphasis on the victimization of women and a portrayal of women [or subs] as passive containers of male sexual ideology”.⁸⁴ Are we really to believe that “male desire” is so monolithic and that socialization operates with 100% accuracy in the same

⁸¹ Ibid., 179.

⁸² Ibid., 180.

⁸³ Ibid., 180.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 181.

single monolithic direction for everyone? To this account how could there be, or has there ever been, an actual “feminist” resistance/existence?

To see out of these repressive and essentialist models of power that leave little room for a satisfying feminist account of political strategies of personal transformation a turn to Foucault can help us to conceive of larger productive power relations operating throughout the population. These relations are unstable and run counter and tangentially with one another in a single body. In this conception of power identity is fragmented and therefore dynamic. Conflicting loyalties are common experiences, and are frequently intensified and called upon from the beginning of a scene. The existence of the switch community, and the perverse relation of power subverting itself between the dom and the top are a reminder that relationships between the individual and society are neither determinate nor random. Theoretical socialization often veers into repressive conceptions of power, but this idealizing of social totality is rarely, if ever, fully/neatly realized in practice. By identifying links between historical formations of self-understanding (atomistic subjectivity) and social dominating institutions (biosocial-economies of efficient productive futurity), as complicated provisional subjects already classified and identified in various ways by biopolitical discourses (patriarchy and capitalism), we are capable of “discovering new ways of understanding ourselves and each other, refusing to accept the dominant culture’s characterizations of our practices and desires, and refusing them from within resistant cultures.”⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Ibid., 186.

V: Conclusions

In the resistant BDSM community, in as much as ‘mastery’ or control/power are acknowledged and in various forms *intensified* and *stylized*, practitioners do not approach a scene with the same misplaced confidence in teleological mastery that Adorno’s reading of Ulysses or *50 Shades of Grey* might lead us to believe. Even in larger kink communities much thought has been put towards articulating these differences (though usually not in direct conversation with Adorno). From the perspective of repressive models of power, engaging in practices of (receiving or giving) pain and restraint are neither safe, nor logical for anyone, especially members of socially oppressed groups or socially privileged groups who wish to liberate themselves/the oppressed, because this is necessarily (at worst) a conscious or (at best) pre-cognitive re-commitment to social controls. But under this approach safety and logic are being deployed in the same way that Adorno’s character of Ulysses, as the archetype for problematic Enlightenment/bourgeois subjectivity, deploys them against himself and those he is subjugating to construct the ‘natural-ness’ of these two positions in patriarchal capitalism. Enlightenment reason would have properly recognizable subjects (re)commit to a conception of autonomous subjectivity and rationality that provide a sense of mastery through the belief that we can have 100 percent safety/mastery through a unified and totalized logic, and that in this space and only this space (taken to be outside of power) can consent be given and received. This logic of “safe, sane, and consensual” (SSC) is not nearly as resistant as that of “risk-aware consensual kink” (RACK). This is because the first is most readily understood to assume that there is such a thing as total safety or stability that can be created with and

through a single standard of safety that can/should be applied across the board. RACK adopts a much more ambiguous premise than that of ‘safe’ and ‘not safe’ present in SSC, mainly that there is only ‘safer’ and ‘less-safe’ as provisionally determined by complicated players in complex relation in its paradigm.

In the *Introduction* and *Bound to Futurity* I discussed some of the ways that pleasure as it has been understood and produced historically in line with, but not always overtly tributed to, certain readings of Freud have lead to a teleological set of acceptable/comprehensible justifications for desire that can be agreed upon as ‘safe’. Proper or healthy subjects are supposed to seek out the calm (lack of tension) that comes at the closure of the “natural” repetition of (re)production. The biopolitical priority of (re)production can be seen in what is prioritized and naturalized in both hetero and homo-normative deployments of sexuality. Those elements that are taken to be more vital to the health of the population are privileged while other elements of its enactment largely remain unmarked, and deviations are pathologized. This is how when talking about healthy sexual subjects and (re)production I am also talking about the privileging of sex that prioritizes efficient production of [male] orgasm, and the avoidance of “inefficient” or counter-productive diversions from the release of this tension. Any harm or good done to others in this paradigm is justified or rationalized as having been done out of the naturalness of reducing an already ‘masculine’ tension. I also think that this same logic is at work in less immediately biologized formations through state/socially acceptable gay marriage because it has been accepted most readily through the perceived and often enacted reaffirmation of the nuclear family and

the reproduction of workers and consumers conceived of more broadly in the figure of the child.

I began this project with concern for how certain forms of violence have become all but invisible to the very discourses that perpetuate them, and for experiences of violence and oppression that have yet to enter into discourse under capitalism. I have seen how those who experience their material conditions in a way that is radically different from privileged, and therefore naturalized, subjects are disproportionately morally condemned as a result of the very same political and economic logics that justify their relegated position. Privileged subjects have control over the possibility, purpose, and ultimate meaning of the material, and cultural situation that is experienced by all; thereby de-legitimizing experiences of the world that are outside of their predetermined ends. So much of how we can relate, talk about, even identify suffering or the experience of the oppressed is mediated through discourses that (re)construct institutions and normative practices that are dependent on the universal sovereignty of subjectivity, and assumed naturalness of utility and efficiency that relate us to a future that is just as blind to the *existence* and possibilities of difference as the present.

While Adorno seems to have pinpointed foundational logics in patriarchal capitalism the preclusion of pain and restraint as they are practiced as strategies by bodies in relation and affirmation of each other's strength qua responsivity and response-ability conflicts with his own account of the potent resistance posed by an exuberant investment in those embodied sensations that threaten the givenness of autonomous atomistic subjectivity and efficient productivity. Starting from a subjectivated identity, to actively seek out this alternative and its possibilities seems to

be predicated on a complicated and ambiguous relationship between ruthlessness and vulnerability. In *For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing* Marx describes the new mode, and role of critique that must be ruthless in two senses: “The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.”⁸⁶ This return to Marx strikes me as pertinent because of the way it articulates ruthlessness and vulnerability’s role in the creation of seemingly new principles out of a self-contained logical context that has forgotten how to see that which is outside of itself. The critic is not taken to be external to these normative tendencies and this is one reason why they must be ruthless in the face of their own possible aversions to this critique and the real scorn of the powers that be. Placing Marx in conversation with the rest of my thesis helps to clarify a positive relationship towards, and commitment to philosophical praxis that leads to a fracture of the old from within; while acknowledging that this will not be carried out externally to internalized and structural logics that moralize and naturalize *contingent* power relations. It is precisely because the critic turns their praxis upon these internalized and structural logics, which moralize and naturalize contingent power relations, that minoritarian critique is so often vilified and labeled violent. All this while normalized violence is not moralized or even seen as problematic. There is a particular stylized violence to critique that is distinct from the larger structural violences that perpetuate stagnant conceptions of subjectivity and reproductive futurity.

⁸⁶ Foucault, Michel, and Duccio Trombadori. *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991. Print. 13.

For Marx, no reformers would claim to have a “clear conception of what the future should be.”⁸⁷ This is precisely the advantage of this new trend in critique, and something that is opened up in the movement of pain and restraint in resistant BDSM. The new trend in reformatory critique does “not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future.”⁸⁸ Instead of employing this tired method of teleological dogmatism it would seek to find “the new world only through criticism of the old.”⁸⁹ Marx asserts that “philosophy has become worldly,”⁹⁰ in that philosophers can no longer see “the solution of all riddles lying in their lectern” and “philosophical consciousness has been drawn...internally, into the stress of battle.”⁹¹ I take this as a call to action on the part of critics and subjects who wish to resist, to abandon abstract and idealized conceptions of ‘safe’ and ‘not safe’. This leaves us with a philosophy of immanence that seeks “a *ruthless criticism of everything existing*.”⁹² Even Marx’s language here indicates the danger posed by the critical philosopher, the threat they pose to normative systems, and their simultaneous exposure to the very real possibility of being morally condemned, and bumping up against these systems even in themselves. This is where strategies of solidarity with others, in the form of pain and restraint in the case of BDSM, are required because there are simply things that we cannot think ourselves out of (or do) alone. The philosopher must not be afraid to act on conclusions that contradict the norm of the culturally/socially dominant logics at play in their time, and the conflict and condemnation that this challenge will garner from those most invested in/by the current

⁸⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁹¹ Ibid., 13.

⁹² Ibid., 13.

system. There is a call for the philosopher to act in spite of their own socialized fear of change and the social forces invested in preserving dominant and historically contingent patriarchal capitalist logics.

The state, in and through institutions of capital, kinship, gender, sexuality, and race, presupposes that it itself is the very realization of Reason. It presents, and reproduces itself materially and ideologically as a closed system or telos. This naturally produces a plethora of contradictions “between its ideal mission and its real preconditions.”⁹³ For Marx the ruthless critic can use this conflict of the political state with itself to “develop social truth.”⁹⁴ The arena of the political state expresses in its form “all social struggles, needs, and truths.”⁹⁵ For Marx, this is precisely what it would look like to develop “new principles to the world out of its own principles.”⁹⁶ There is an understated violence that Marx is describing here that is a distinct form of *critical* violence that comes from the praxis of this new ruthless critique. There is the *naturalized* violence of existing teleological modes of reasoning such as the liberal state, capitalist economics, or mythic femininity⁹⁷ and there is the *transformative* violence of loss in victory that Marx is describing. For the joyful practitioners of BDSM this is the joy of abandon at the limits of subjectivity pushing past itself through the affirmative juxtaposition of pleasure and pain intensified through restraint in the quest for nongratification, though this nongratification does not look the same for everyone. This second form of violence would be understood (in the frame of normative reason)

⁹³ Tucker, Robert C. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 2d ed. New York: Norton, 1978. Print. 14.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁷ Not expressly problematized in Marx, but there is a similar approach to Beauvoir’s critique of femininity.

as a threat, and as a moralize-able evil violence because of the ontological, epistemological, and temporal threat it poses when carried out in praxis. Only bad subjects who are wrong from the outset would defy the *natural* order of things. Marx tells us that a ruthless critique can challenge this interpretation of bottom-up philosophical and critical action. There is more to *transformative* loss than the normative subject rationale, or conception of pleasure would lead us to believe.

Marx's analysis of this new critic's need to be doubly ruthless highlights the normative tendency of subjects under capitalism to assign teleological significance to matter, and then be surprised or frightened when confronted with resistant experiences of embodiment that contradict the assertion that production is everything, and subjectivity, rationality, and utility i.e. the western-metaphysical project doesn't matter to everyone, and isn't affirming to everyone in all cases. This is because Marx calls on the critic to know that their critique will be a threat (ruthless), in that it will be a challenge for even the critic to swallow their own medicine. The part of the normative subject, or even the part of the critical subject, that is most connected to core normative discourses experiences and reacts to this Marxist critical praxis as a challenge, as evil, and as violence because it is to them unjustified, unreasoned, and seemingly rising up out of a nowhere that should not *be*. In this critique, the subject/object divide of the critic and culture is blurred. In the case of BDSM we see a desire that is founded in this paradox, and acknowledges the pleasure of existing in it. Under a teleological system such as capitalism there are supposedly no bad situations, only realities of the world as understood through capital's own self-serving/limiting logic. Because of this there are no bad situations, only bad subjects. Including BDSM in discussions of resistance

amplifies our reading of embodiment, and can affirm difference of experience, and through this (situated) inclusion diversifies the possible ways of challenging ourselves and others to confront that which has been constructed to be impossible/irrational.

In the wake of the ascension of atomistic bourgeois consciousness and rationality under capitalism, productive subjectivity/utility and efficiency are now largely taken for granted as the reality of not only all matter under the sun, but also affect as it is linked to experiences and interactions with the body. It is this conflation that grounds our normative and historically contingent conceptions of pleasure and the perverse. The resistant content behind the particular perversions of pain and restraint in BDSM is a threat, precisely because in their joyful enactment, the openness to abandonment of autonomous subjectivity and reproductive futurity makes these pleasures difficult to immediately determine. Which is to say, in their *pleasureable* enactment they reveal themselves as erotic possibilities that are in fact present in the world, and thereby can break into discourse at the price of the sovereignty of the conservative epistemological and ontological firmament of the normative atomistic bourgeois subject's conception of what is rightly pleasureable. I take this to be a helpful description of the stakes at work in the loss that happens in the *critical* turn in philosophy Marx describes in *For a Ruthless Critique*. For both Marx and philosophers/radicals open to taking BDSM seriously, *social/political critique* can be a creative and *self-shattering* practice at the level of the critic. This criticism is made all the more difficult, if not ultimately legitimated as critique, through the necessity of the critic to not be afraid of their own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be. This double ruthlessness might also be conceived of as a double vulnerability to one's

own discoveries and their implications about one's own bias or complicity, and the moral rebuke of normative subjects and institutions. The disruption of teleological "good sense" when it comes to sex and pleasure as it relates to a culture of seemingly already naturalized justifications based in productivity and atomistic subjectivity, offered by resistant and queer BDSM praxis, offers a way to open up again the possibility for the erotic to step beyond the coital imperative and (re)productive potential as justification for orgasm (even to step away from orgasm as the de facto medium of erotic exchange). This is significant for the development of more intersectional and nuanced conceptions of recognition, solidarity, as well as the sort of embodied resistances that are significant for the day-to-day and large scale political action that radical political philosophers and activists would be as remiss to preclude as to blanketly enforce.

*"I am undone in this transporative act, not by it neatly restored to my tidily delimited self. And upon the restoration which can only come later, I find my limits stretched, and a new sense of permeability, the 'new knowledge' that my subjectivity can be shattered, a new temptation."*⁹⁸

⁹⁸ MacKendrick, Karmen. Counterpleasures. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 1999. Print. 155.

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